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Countless fabulous memories were made at Lavender's Pride Score Thursday event at LUSH on June 20.
Photo by Sophia Hantzes

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Dearly Beloved

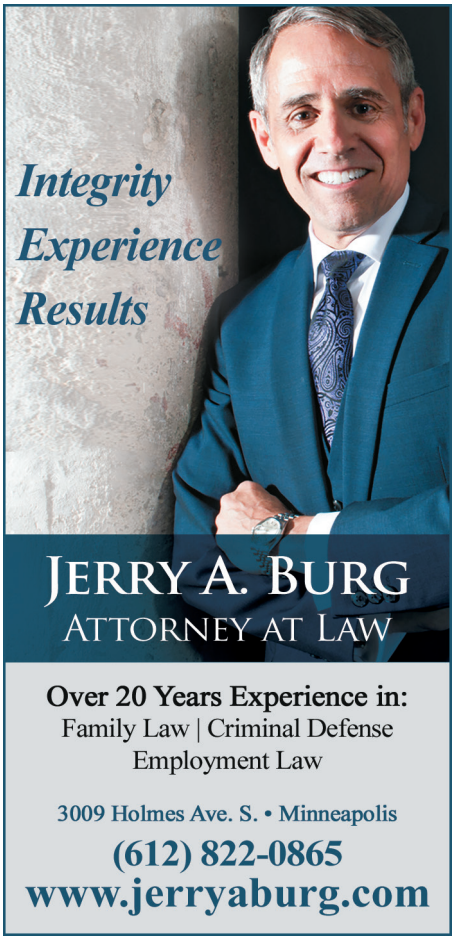
When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade, and when the Twin Cities gives you Pride, you make not one, not two, but THREE Pride In Pictures issues!

The sheer abundance of Pride celebrations in Minnesota during the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots gave us so many amazing memories, that *Lavender* is making our annual Pride in Pictures issue into a trilogy! Be sure to scope out our amazing photos commemorating some of the best that the Twin Cities had to offer for Pride season!

Also, with prime wedding season in full swing, we have some great Wedding Style content for your reading pleasure! We meet the proprietors of the amazing Barn at Copper Creek in Menomonie, perfect for hosting your most special of days; we learn about Holman's Table in St. Paul, a prime wedding venue for all seasons; and we sneak a peek at the heavenly horticulture and fabulous floral fanciness of Best Wishes Floral and Indulge and Bloom.

On top of that, we meet openly gay Army vet Charles Cole and learn about how he turned his life around with Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans; we preview the upcoming Twin Cities People of Color Pride Festival; and recurring *Lavender* contributor Holly Peterson debuts her new Ace of Babes column, waxing eloquent on the asexual community and its representation in pop culture!

Summer's halfway over, and that's pretty hard to accept! Get outside and enjoy this warmth before Old Man Winter overstays his welcome once more in mere months! ∎



A WORD IN EDGEWISE | BY E.B. BOATNER

‘Pon My Word

“A man’s word is his bond,” is a statement repeated in one form or another through centuries (and applies to women, though seldom recognized in patriarchal societies). *Numbers* 30:2 declares, “If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth.” Bishop of Exeter Joseph Hall wrote in 1608, “His word is his parchment, and his yea his oath; which he will not violate for fear or for loss.”

A “word,” as a binding application is unique to each individual man and woman, declared through vocalization, handshake, or signature, to declare that individual will do what they say without fail or excuse. One’s word can seal the deal for a horse trade, property sale, marriage vow, or assumption of high office. Down on Old Broadway, Mindy’s gambler-patrons, according to Damon Runyon, offered their “markers,” while U.S. Presidents publicly make an oath/affirmation after they have been elected but before assuming office.

Obviously, a person’s word is only as valid as the intention behind the promise. In *Guys and Dolls*, Sky Masterson hands Sarah his marker—written on the back of an Isaiah quote placard. She hesitates, he reassures; “If you don’t think it’s good, ask anybody in town.” Later, she wishes to release him from the proposition. Sky demurs; “I cannot welsh a marker.”

Others in the nest of gamblers can, and do, without a flicker of a scruple. During a craps game in a sewer in the bowels of Broadway, Big Jule, tapped-out, demands to play on credit. “Here is my marker,” he snarls, scribbling “IOU one thousand dollars, X.” He commences to roll his personal, blank dice. “I had the spots taken off for luck. But I remember where the spots formerly were.” He sports a gun, no one complains.

Real leaders aren’t as easy or amusing to parse, and I don’t intend to enter that dark and thorny bramble in these few allotted words; let the musical make my point. There are always the Sky Mastersons; they believe that to be known for welching a marker is losing the passport to your country. You are no longer a citizen, but a “chump,” and a chump is nobody. And always the Big Jules, who without a qualm file the spots off their dice, sign markers with “X” and carry a betsy in their vest to silence dissent.

A man can put his hand on a Bible, a law book, a mint copy of *Donald Duck in Ancient Persia*, or thrust it in his pocket. If he holds the intent to honor his oath or intention, his word alone is gold. Without intention, solemn words and rituals will have no effect. Just something to keep in mind. ∎

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LAVENDER'S PRIDE SCORE THURSDAY

June 20, 2019

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PRIDE in PICTURES

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PRIDE WEEKEND AT LUSH

June 21-23, 2019

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WEST SAINT PAUL PRIDE IN THE PARK

June 30, 2019

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PRIDE in PICTURES

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HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN ANNUAL FEDERAL CLUB PRIDE BRUNCH

June 22, 2019

PRIDE in PICTURES

Photos by Sophia Hantzes

COLUMBIA HEIGHTS PRIDE FESTIVAL

July 13, 2019

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STONEWALL 50TH ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATION

June 28, 2019

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2019 MINNESOTA TWINS PRIDE NIGHT

July 23, 2019

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QUORUM SECTION

BOTANICAL DANCING

Through Aug. 11
Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Ave. S., Minneapolis
www.fringefestival.org

The integration of dance and visual art is the essence of a new dance work about ecology and the earth. It even utilizes paint. Choreographer Lily Conforti shares, "it has been so much fun finding ways to fold different artistic mediums into one show. One of my goals as the choreographer, has been to deliver something that isn't super familiar to every audience member. Having a close knit group of dancers has allowed us to do that while building a challenging and exciting show. We have had so much groovy, punky, crazy fun while creating, and all that energy is evident in *Botanical Dancing*."

FLOYD'S

Though Aug. 31
Guthrie Theater, 818 S. 2nd St., Minneapolis
612-377-2224
www.guthrietheater.org

Two time Pulitzer Prize-winner Lynn Nottage was commissioned by the Guthrie Theater to write a play about a truck stop sandwich shop that employs those who were once incarcerated. Nottage spent two years in Reading, Pennsylvania to research how hard times, loss of industry, race, and social barriers have been factors in upsetting people's lives. Two Tony-nominated members of the Broadway company of Nottage's Pulitzer-winner, *Sweat,* are featured: Johanna Day and John Earl Jelks. Directed by Kate Whoriskey, who has staged other Nottage works as well. Past Nottage plays that have been given first-rate productions locally have been *Ruined* at Mixed Blood, *Intimate Apparel* at the Guthrie, and *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* at Penumbra Theatre.

FOOTLOOSE

Through Aug. 18
Bloomington Center for the Arts, 1800 W. Old Shakopee Rd., Bloomington
952-563-8575
www.artistrymn.org

Unbridled youth challenges rigid adulthood in the classic film musical that was adapted for the stage and now it plays at Artistry. Choreographer Heidi Spesard-Noble said shortly before the opening, "My job as choreographer is to create visually stunning dance moments in the show, but especially in *Footloose* to illuminate each individual character through dance. In order to accomplish that, I really need triple threat talent. This cast is full of numerous triple threats! I am having so much fun in rehearsal exploring and collaborating with such a hungry and versatile group of artists. I also love where we are living in this show: Nebraska, 1983, which lends itself to numerous dance styles; the emergence of hip hop, the tail end of disco and country line dancing!"

OPERATION: IMMIGRATION

Through Aug. 11
Mixed Blood Theatre, 1501 S. 4th St. Minneapolis
www.fringefestival.org

Avi Aharoni is one of the most dynamic young actors in the Twin Cities and he returns to Fringe after a terrific turn in last year's Fringe hit in *Summers in Prague*. Aharoni is the son of a Persian Israeli man who taught him the importance of Judaism and Israel. The actor, who has also written the piece, says, "Born in Iran in the 1940s, my father emigrated with his family as a young teenager to Israel when it was still a new, vulnerable country. Soon after, he supports his family by going to work, eventually fighting in three wars, and ultimately moving to the suburbs of Minneapolis with five children and an American wife. It's the story of a twice-immigrant man with a huge heart who worked with his hands all his life so he could give opportunities to his loved ones." Beloved Guthrie Theater veteran actor Robert Dorfman, who directed Aharoni this year in the powerful *Shul* for Minnesota Jewish Theatre, also directs him in this solo performance.

#ORDINARYHEROES

Through Aug. 10
Ritz Theatre, 345 13th Ave. NE., Minneapolis
www.fringefestival.org

Minneapolis Ballet Dancers are a sure bet with these multiple dance works that draw from contemporary and classical ballet. Dancer Jolie Meshbesher says, "It is very challenging to find genuine human beings. In today's world, this seems to be especially resonant. This project aims to re-frame our collective definition of superheroes, hopefully to include those around us who we would never suspect." Three years ago this same troupe presented a splendid offering titled *Assemble*. Katherine Hesterberg, who choreographed and performed for that presentation, is the director of this one.

SAMUEL J AND K

Through Aug. 4
Gremlin Theatre, 550 Vandalia St., St. Paul
1-888-TICKETS
www.gremlintheatre.org

Brian Balcom directed last year's crackling Gremlin production of Aaron Loeb's *Ideation*. This year he staged Mat Smart's *Tinkers to Evers to Chance* for Artistry. This summer he's back at Gremlin and this time he's staging a Mat Smart work there: *Samuel J and K* with Paul LaNave and Wariboko Seminitari. Balcom says it's "a play about what makes family and where we find home. Especially, how we can create a new family and discover a new home in unconventional ways. It could be something we're born into or it could be assembled from different pieces. Mat has crafted a story about two brothers brought together from half a world away, each struggling to find his place in an environment that doesn't seem to fit. And while they search for what makes them complete, they discover that home isn't where they expected and is easier to find than they thought."

STOOPIDITY

Through Aug. 11
U of M Rarig Center, 330 21st Ave. S. Minneapolis
www.fringefestival.org

Domino D'Lorion is one of three co-creators in the remounting of STOOPIDITY: at the Minnesota Fringe Festival. He plays the role of "C", one of three boys who sits on the stoop of an apartment building and calls the piece "an exploration of three characteristics/archetypes/energies that are traditionally, negatively connotated when embraced with the black male body: The Romantic, The Philosopher, and, of course, The Queer. Being a pansexual Afro-Latinx person, I use queer because I want black boys on all parts of the LGTBQIA+ to be able to see some aspect of themselves in C. Whether that be sexuality, softness, beauty, strength, masculinity, femininity, fluidity, it's important that all of us feel seen. In addition to exploring our existence, I wanted to explore the positivity and honesty of a relationship a queer person can have with the heterosexual men in their lives: Friends and Father; one that exists both in a perfect world and the fractured reality we live in today. The character of C is one that is a deep reflection of not just the real-life fears and pain that becomes young queer black boys and men, but simultaneously, a dream of what things could be like in an ideal world: two worlds that generate electricity and tension. An existence that is fact, an existence built on love, an existence supporting life."

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THE VIKING AND THE GAZELLE

Through Aug. 11
Phoenix Theatre, 2605 Hennepin Ave.
Minneapolis
www.fringefestival.org

Romance and contrasting racial heritage infuses this play by Suzanne and William Bengston. Chicago's South Side meets the Minneapolis suburb of Hopkins. The co-writers themselves, who married in 2014, have had to navigate their own marriage and how that is responded to by their seven children and eight grandchildren. Indeed, they bring a unique perspective that will surely have value in out time of racial controversy. Actor Matt Saxe shares, "The play brings up thought-provoking relationship issues that many people may have never encountered. I admire my character's resilience to overcome previous life experiences and sustain his desire to find his soul mate. I'm excited to see how audiences respond."

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Chronofon returns to Open Eye with a new tribute to 20th century music and composers who took the road less traveled. Performer Bradley Greenwald says their newest work "includes many of the songs born of the tremendous collaboration between composer Kurt Weill and playwright-poet Bertolt Brecht, like *Alabama Song*, *Surabaya Johnny,* and the title song; but (it) also illuminates the tumultuous times that gave immediacy to their singular artistry: the end of the democratic experiment of the Weimar Republic in Germany, and the rise of nationalism, misinformation, the elimination of progressive ideas, and ultimately fascism. And we also focus on a surprising revelation, known only to a few academics and aficionados: Brecht's lifelong collaborator, Elizabeth Hauptmann, a struggling writer, was not only responsible for instigating *The Threepenny Opera* and *Happy End*, but was also the lyricist for some of Weill's best known songs, with credit and royalties going to Brecht. Of course, any political and social parallels between 1929 and 2019 will be discerned by the audience." Greenwald has co-created the piece with Prudence Johnson, Diana Grasselli, and Dan Chouinard. ▮

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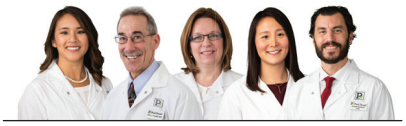

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Minnesota Fringe 2019 Features Memories of Stonewall and the Pulse Massacre, Drag Storytelling, Bisexual Unicorns & More

The Minnesota Fringe Festival always reverberates with queer subject matter and that which challenges gender norms. This year is no different and it seems to percolate with an added charge of queerness given this is the 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and the Third Anniversary of the Pulse Massacre. There are also some offerings that aren't queer in substance but will surely stimulate. Most productions last no more than one hour and are presented at various Minneapolis-St. Paul Venues.

First Comes Love, Theatre in The Round, Minneapolis

Three years ago, shooter Omar Mir Seddique, a.k.a. Omar Mateen, committed the deadliest crime ever on U.S. soil up to that time. His Pulse Massacre is still the worst mass murder of GLBT people in American history. Playwright Stephanie M. Hipple visited Orlando's Lake Eola and relates, "Where the community had spontaneously set up candles around the edge of the lake as a memorial. It was late in the evening and each trumpeter swan, floated in front of each candle, their head bowed, as far as the eye could see, in an extraordinary tribute to those souls lost and injured at Pulse."

The Bisexual Unicorn and Other Mythological Creatures, Theatre in the Round, Minneapolis

Described as "a menagerie of LGBT+ individuals" who perform circus acts and tell their stories in a big top setting: balancing acts, magic tricks, clowning, and poi dancing. Brian Watson Jones plays the ringleader. Producer Jena Young says, "I've actually been wait-listed for over 10 years now—it's a kind of joke. I came up with the concept for this particular show five years ago, and have been submitting it ever since. It's just such an important show, dealing with how those of us in the community feel the need to perform our letters, or put ourselves on display. I wanted to give people an opportunity to share their experiences and five years later, I finally can."

Xena and Gabrielle Smash the Patriarchy, Theatre in the Round, Minneapolis

Producer-performer Ariel Leaf shares, "We all long for a hero, a female hero, and a queer icon to call our own. While Xena and Gabrielle's relationship was never defined, they were embraced by the queer community who saw a thriving love in their fierce battles and steamy baths together. While there are many ways to 'smash the patriarchy', we choose to focus on the more subtle and insidious; those hiding within our 'safe spaces'. A threat from within can splinter and divide communities, and often cause more harm than outsider forces."

Mighty Real, Augsburg Mainstage, Augsburg University, Minneapolis

One of Minnesota Fringe's iconic presenters is the dazzlingly queer Marvel Ann Theater. Imagine a piano bar at closing time when a 50 year historical perspective suddenly emerges. This tribute to the 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall Riots brings perspectives from five generations. Raine Hokan (*All About Steve*), the director and curator of *Mighty Real* shares that what began as "a storytelling piece has now evolved into a full ensemble-driven narrative. Although Dan Barth and I wove together the through-story, all of these tales are true and deepened by the individual performers who lived them."

Glass & Lady M., Dreamland Arts, St. Paul

Presented by Full Circle Theatre Company, which recently gave us the beguiling *Caught* at Dowling Studio. Martha B. Johnson directs two new works in development, which you can see in one sitting one right after the other. She shares, "While each piece provides a powerful contrast and foil to the other, deep resonances surprisingly emerge. *Glass,* written by first -time playwright Lindsey Bushnell, is a dystopian, feminist absurdist play about women trapped behind glass. *Lady M.* is re-envisioning of Lady Macbeth's iconic sleepwalking scene, evoking themes of remorse, reparations, and redemption in terms of American history. Two artists in our team are members of the LGBT community."

Chorus, Rarig Center, U o M, Minneapolis

You can experience physical theater, GLBT content, live original and choral music as a collegiate choir journeys across the U.S. for their annual tour. Actor Alex Van Loh shares, "I'm excited to take a trip down memory lane by heading back to my choir days. And to do so as a character with a story and background similar to mine is such a cool opportunity. They show does a great job of bringing all these unique voices and perspectives together and allowing them to blend both narratively and vocally."

The Dwelling Place, Rarig Center Thrust Stage, U of M, Minneapolis

Set in Ireland in 1989, two heterosexual married couples. There's a playwright with writer's block and his wife who runs the Bed and Breakfast where they live. There's also a breeder of sheep and border collies married to a woman who runs the local pub. Written by Kevin Bowen and Lynn Bowen, this "dramedy" looks at challenges caused by government and religious restrictions where divorce was still illegal in 1989. Divorce options had been available for centuries in Ireland until 1937 until the passage of a new constitution denied couples the right to file for divorce.

Super Drag Story Time, Barbara Baker Center for Dance, U of M, Minneapolis

Director Martina Marraccino says, "Our show is trying to create a space for kids of

Continued on page 24

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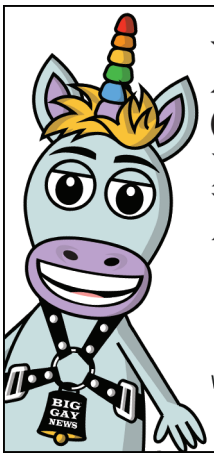

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all kinds to feel safe and empowered to be them and to present themselves to the world however feels right. We want queer and non-queer kids alike to come out of the show having had a great time but also with some helpful nuggets on how to deal with some of the difficult or uncomfortable situations that kids often face. From being left out on social media, to same-sex parents, to to wanting to be a mermaid, *Super Drag Story Time* has something for everyone. Come as you are, or come dressed to impress!"

A Tension to Detail, Roxy Theatre, Minneapolis

British storyteller and standup Gerard Harris has gleaned much from his experience in therapy. This piece is said to address Head v. Heart, Love v. Fear, Jews vs. Lobsters, Bulldogs vs. IQ Tests, and perhaps most important of all, You vs. The Stories You've Been Telling Yourself. Harris identifies as a heterosexual British-Canadian-South African Jewish guy who also includes some GLBT content. He has been reviewed very favorably and has been compared to Woody Allen and Robin Williams.

Dr. Deep - Life Sucks, But I'm Cool With It, Dreamland Arts, St. Paul

Zaraawar Mistry shares, "I have created many one-person shows, but when I created the persona of Dr. Deep in 2015, it was a significant departure for me as it was the first time I had attempted to write a comedy. Dr. Deep is a fictional, extremely successful new-age philosopher and the show satirizes the various South Asian Indian beliefs and practices, and the contemporary trends in psychology and neuroscience, that have influenced the multi-million dollar industry of new-age spirituality and well being in America."

Artificial at Mixed Blood Theatre, Minneapolis

Kelly Danger, who plays the role of an A.I. robot, says, "The role of Athena is wholly unique in my experience as an actress: a character who is not motivated by love, or relationships, who does not seek power or wealth; a truly neutral being who must navigate through the chaos of humanity. I love being a part of this unique take on relationships and morality."

Can I Borrow Your Poop?, Strike Theater

Amie Durenberger looks at living with an undiagnosed chronic illness. Storytelling, stand-up, and musical comedy are used to comment on misogyny in medicine, alternative health options. She shares, "Four years ago I went on a trip, caught a parasite, and my life has never been the same! It's been an unfortunate experience, for sure, but I wanted to make a show that focused on the humor, the absurdity, and the unexpected parts of losing your health instead of the trauma. I would definitely say the tone of the show is glass half full, even if the water in that cup happens to be contaminated with parasites." ∎

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2019 PICK the knot best of weddings

Tie The Knot At The Table

Taking off or landing, Holman's Table offers a go-to restaurant for flyers of the Downtown St. Paul Airport and hungry locals alike.

By Kassidy Tarala

Since opening in 2018 right before Super Bowl LII in Minneapolis, Holman's Table has been a staple in the St. Paul cuisine scene. Though the Downtown St. Paul Airport is only open to private planes, the airport's newest resident restaurant welcomes all.

"The idea was to be there to support those flying in and out during the day, and then to be a destination at night," says Nikki Wallace, marketing and communications director of Holman's Table. "We've been lucky enough to be that and more."

Holman's Table has become a popular meeting spot for lunch, a go-to brunch place for locals, and the ultimate date night (think helicopter rides… hello, Christian Grey?). The Earhart Room offers an intimate space for private events, perfect for a wedding ceremony or reception.

"We're located in a historical terminal that screams charm and history," Wallace says. "Our windows—and patio in the summer months—are directly on the tarmac, perfect for plane viewing. We're all about providing a truly memorable experience no matter what the reason for guests' visits."

Before Holman's Table entered the scene, the Holman Field airport had a vacancy after its previous restaurant closed in 1999. The chef-crafted, fresh, modern, sophisticated dishes have so far been well received by all diners. Serving breakfast, brunch, lunch, dinner, and a full bar, Holman's Table is always ready to serve a hungry customer. From its biscuits & gravy and grapefruit brûlée to its chicken roulade and steak tartare, Holman's Table's menu is littered with everything from hearty comfort food to lighter fare.

"If you're looking for a truly unique venue to host a wedding event, Holman's Table has it," Wallace says. "The space is art deco and charming, and our staff always puts hospitality first; we partner with our guests to host a memorable event."

The Earhart Room private event space can accommodate parties of various sizes, including sit-down receptions or standing cocktail events.

The Earhart Room private event space can accommodate parties of various sizes, including sit-down receptions or standing cocktail events. Photo courtesy of Holman's Table

Holman's Table serves breakfast, brunch, lunch, dinner, and a full bar. Photo courtesy of Holman's Table

Located at the Downtown St. Paul Airport, Holman's Table has been a staple in the St. Paul cuisine scene. Photo by Paul Bearmon- pbpics

If you're interested in celebrating your own love story at this unique airport destination restaurant, Wallace says they're always eager to help out. With their own event planner, she says clients are always accommodated until their special day is exactly as they imagined it.

"Our event coordinator ensures every detail is perfection. Our chef will hand-craft menus that are paired perfectly with a classic cocktail," Wallace says. "We can accommodate many requests and appreciate tailoring events specific to the client."

Whether there's a favorite of yours from the Holman's Table menu or you want to serve a completely original menu at your wedding, Holman's Table's chef is ready to make it happen. The ability to create new dishes and personalize the space within the Earhart Room make Holman's Table an intimate, unique spot to make your wedding unlike any other.

"We've been fortunate to work with many GLBT guests," Wallace says. "Our space and hospitality provide an intimate feeling and ease for clients. This summer, we had the honor of hosting a full wedding ceremony and reception for two incredible women."

Holman's Table even hosts some of its own special occasions, including half-priced bottles of wine on Tuesdays. Helicopter rides can be reserved online. For a gift, a dinner and flight package is available, which includes $100 toward dinner at Holman's Table and $100 toward a helicopter ride.

For more information about Holman's Table, visit www.holmanstable.com. ∎

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Located in Menomonie, Wisconsin, The Barn at Copper Creek is an ideal wedding venue to celebrate your special day. Photo courtesy of The Barn at Copper Creek

Goin' To The Barn, And We're Gonna Get Married

Mitchell Potter, co-owner of The Barn at Copper Creek in Menomonie, Wisconsin shares what makes their newly opened venue the perfect spot for a barn wedding.

By Kassidy Tarala

Originally from the Twin Cities, Mitchell Potter and his partner, Chase, knew that they wanted to live in the country. After meeting online and falling in love, the couple got married in 2013 when same-sex marriage was legalized in the state of Minnesota, and they haven't stopped marrying since.

Mitchell and Chase opened The Barn at Copper Creek in Menomonie, Wisconsin, just an hour from the Twin Cities, this summer and celebrated their very first event on July 20.

"We always knew we wanted to live in the country, and when we saw the area's rolling hills and rural character, we knew it was right where we wanted to be," Mitchell says. "We really liked the idea of creating a farm where we could be proud to host events, and the old barn on the property seemed like the perfect place."

The Barn at Copper Creek is nestled in the valley below Otteson Bluff, making it the perfect place to celebrate your special day.

"You and your guests will love the spectacular indoor space for up to 300, spacious and romantic grounds, handcrafted tables and bar, and the historic charm of a working small-scale farm," Mitchell says.

The raw nature and maintained history of the barn make it an ideal wedding location for all couples, from the outdoorsy to those looking for some great pasture shots for Instagram. Mitchell and Chase offer full weekend access at The Barn at Copper Creek, and they also allow flexibility with catering and alcohol, though they do offer a preferred vendor list including discounted rates.

The Barn at Copper Creek can host up to 300 guests for a wide array of events. Photo courtesy of The Barn at Copper Creek

"For GLBT couples, we offer something simple yet tremendously important—we will accept you as you are, unconditionally and without reservation," Mitchell says.

A gay couple themselves, Mitchell says even rural areas like Menomonie, Wisconsin are becoming more progressive than ever before. His husband, Chase, ran for town chairman (like a mayor but for a township), and he was elected in April.

Co-owned and operated by Mitchell and Chase Potter, The Barn at Copper Creek opened its doors this July. Photo courtesy of The Barn at Copper Creek

"There was a large voter turnout, and he defeated the 10-term incumbent by a significant margin," Mitchell says. Overall, The Barn at Copper Creek and Menomonie as a whole are

Originally from the Twin Cities, Mitchell and Chase Potter were wed in 2013 before eventually moving to Menomonie. Photo courtesy of The Barn at Copper Creek

becoming an excellent destination for same-sex marriages.

"We've only just opened, and our first event (was) on July 20, 2019. But we are truly looking forward to hosting GLBT weddings," Mitchell says.

When Chase and Mitchell were planning their own wedding in 2013, Mitchell says they were actually turned down by the first venue they approached because they were a same-sex couple. After staring bigotry and discrimination right in the face, the couple decided they wanted to offer other same-sex couples a wedding venue that isn't just picturesque, but also accepting and welcoming regardless of who you're marrying.

"Due to that experience, as we moved on to look at other venues, we always wondered whether they really wanted to host our event. For this reason, we are happy to be able to provide a GLBT-owned, operated, and affirming barn venue," Mitchell says.

In addition to the barn, The Barn at Copper Creek has a fully operating farm, which has a majority of animals from endangered farm breeds, some of which are so rare that only a handful of farms are keeping them alive in the country. Among them are the Arapawa goats, American guinea hogs, and Percheron horses. As Mitchell and Chase provide a safe place to say "I do" to GLBT couples, they're also making a home for animals that otherwise might no longer be here today.

For more information about The Barn at Copper Creek or to read more about Mitchell and Chase's love story, visit www.barnatcoppercreek.com. ▮

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Bloom Where You Wish

Best Wishes Floral and Indulge and Bloom, two local gay-owned florists, offer unique floral arrangements and services for weddings and receptions.

By Kassidy Tarala

Even in the middle of a Minnesota blizzard, Best Wishes Floral and Indulge and Bloom can transport your wedding to a tropical paradise. From bouquets and corsages to full venue decorations, these two Twin Cities-based companies are serving up the very best in floral arrangements so your wedding can bloom in style.

Open since 1986, Best Wishes Floral was purchased by Frank Bohlander and Mark Hall in 2006 when the previous owners retired. Bohlander had been working in the industry since he was 13 years old, and he was eager to own his own shop.

"My design style is an amalgamation of various styles and ideas that I have learned over the years. It tends to be very organic with natural materials and colors, creating rich and textual designs. We use as many locally grown products as practical to create fresh long-lasting arrangements," Bohlander says.

While Bohlander managed and designed for a floral shop for 15 years, Hall had less experience in the industry. After retiring from his previous position in the health care information systems field, Hall decided it was time for a change. Hall and Bohlander, who have been together for more than 28 years, bring different skills to the table, making Best Wishes Floral a successful business.

"We have been an A+ rated member of the BBB since 2006. We were an honorable mention for Quorum's 2019 Business of the Year," Bohlander says. "We have been voted Best Florist and Best Gift Shop in Golden Valley for the last three years in the Sun Post Reader's Choice Awards. I have also received several personal floral design awards."

Best Wishes Floral offers a full service wedding flower source for bouquets, corsages and boutonnieres, ceremony decorations, reception decorations, and everything in between. They also offer delivery and installation or can pack orders for pick-up.

"We approach each couple/wedding individually and will customize your order to meet your needs and budget, whether it's $100 or $10,000," Bohlander says. "As a wedding resource, I would say we have about one same-sex marriage to every 10 mixed-sex marriage. We have many walk-in customers that I'm sure are representative of our community's mix."

Bohlander says their number one goal is to always be the best florist they can be. "We pride ourselves on our customer service and quality products. We are open and honest about who we are and are engaged in our community on many fronts—from supporting the Golden Valley Pride Festival to our schools, KBEM-Jazz88 radio, our local food shelf (PRISM) and by supporting groups like Reclaim and Our Justice," he says.

Best Wishes Floral offers a full service wedding flower source for bouquets, corsages and boutonnieres. Photo by Mark Hall/Best Wishes Floral

Frank Bohlander and Mark Hall have run Best Wishes Floral since 2006. Photo by Adrian Moy

You can admire the "ALL ARE WELCOME HERE" sign in their front window, Bohlander says. "So I'd have to say it's important to represent the LGBT community and do so in a positive and interactive way," he adds.

Like Bohlander, Raed Kakish, owner of Indulge and Bloom, has been in the industry for a long time.

"Floral arranging came naturally to me from an early age. As friends began getting married, I would be asked to do their flowers. I was studying pre-med at the University of Minnesota during this time, and before I knew it, I was so busy doing floral design that I decided to take a break from studies and pursue this new path that was opening up before me," Kakish says.

The award-winning Indulge and Bloom is a full-service shop for weddings and special events. Photo courtesy of Raed Kakish

Kakish says his goal for Indulge and Bloom was not to be the average mom-and-pop shop. Instead, he wanted to offer people a store with exotic, unique, and fun arrangements. Indulge and Bloom has been awarded "Best Exotic Flowers" and "Best Wedding/Event Planner" by the *Minneapolis-St. Paul Magazine* Diamond awards. They were also voted "Best Modern Wedding Chicago" in Borrowed and Blue, and "Best Lush Flowers" by *Minnesota Monthly.*

"We are your go-to, full-service shop for weddings and events. We can create your wedding from scratch; we meet with you and learn your tastes and style, preview our vast rental catalogue (candelabras, vases, dance floor), discuss save-the-date and invitations, and depending on your budget, we provide stunning floral for the wedding ceremony all the way up to the full-service package (flowers, entertainment, food service, wedding planner—you name it)," Kakish says.

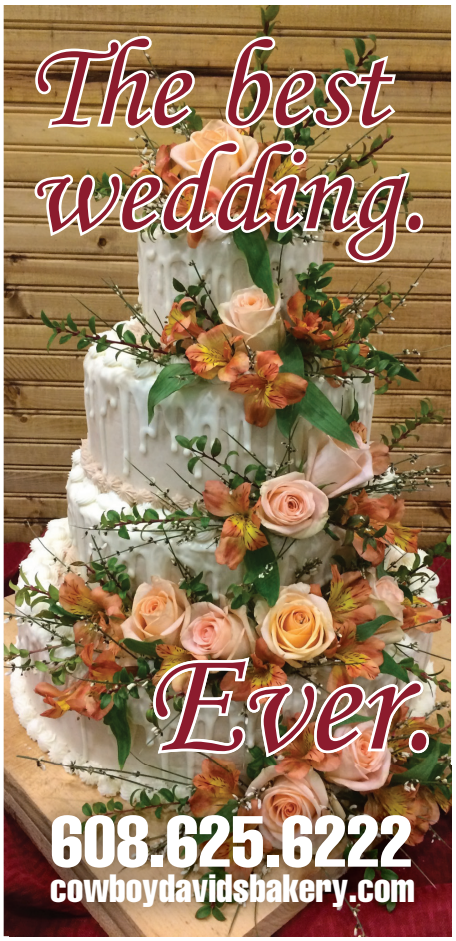
Indulge and Bloom has always had a solid GLBT client base, Kakish says.

"Since the beginning, we have had a solid clientele consisting of the GLBT community. Even prior to the legalization of marriage for all, we provided floral for many GLBT weddings," he says.

Kakish says his first business partner was actually his first partner, and the couple even poured homemade soaps, which they sold in their first shop on Hennepin Avenue.

"Supporting the GLBT community is in our core—just like the beautiful variety of exotic flowers allows us to create our amazing arrangements, the wonderful variety of our clientele makes us who we are and strive to be," Kakish adds.

For more information about Best Wishes Floral and Indulge and Bloom, visit bwfloral.com and indulgeandbloom.com. ▮



COMMUNITY | BY CHRIS TARBOX

Lend A Hand, Pay It Forward

Army vet SPC Charles Cole discusses life as a gay serviceman and getting his post-service life back on the right track thanks to help from MACV.

Having served his time in the United States Army during the tail end of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, SPC Charles Cole definitely wishes he could've been more open about his true self than he was allowed.

"I feel like now we're in the rebuilding stage of getting back to how far we came," said Cole. "I think we took a wrong turn. So we kind of found our way back."

"If I could go back, I would have liked to be more open, mainly because I came out soon as I graduated, and I had three weeks to be my true self," Cole continued. "And then from there, I had to go in the military. So you know it's sort of like, 'Okay, I took off the coat. And now I got to put it back on.'"

Regardless, Cole never felt shame for who he truly was. A native of Jackson, Tennessee, Cole joined the military immediately after graduating high school. That exact same time, Cole came out as a gay man: three weeks before shipping off for Basic Training.

"It's not so different (from) being in the closet," said Cole on being a gay man in the military. "It's just like going right back in the closet. You really can't tell anybody about it, but of course you know. The gay people, we all know each other's gay. So you know we kind of formed those circles and those bonds. We made a joke that we're like the 'underground ballroom scene' of the military. We had little get-togethers at people's houses. We might Vogue, we might J-step, it was like Pose!"

SPC Charles Cole ended his active-duty career in the army as an E-4 Specialist. Photo courtesy of Charles Cole

Stationed at Fort Lewis in Tacoma, Washington, Cole did two tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. After a few years as an active-duty serviceman, Cole decided to join the Reserves and get his postsecondary education, eventually ending up at the University of Memphis. After that, Cole took an opportunity to come up to Minnesota in late 2016, although there was a bit of a bump on the road following his move.

Cole, an openly gay veteran of two overseas tours, currently serves as a member of the Uptown VFW. Photo courtesy of Charles Cole

"When I came here, I came under false pretenses. I came up here with… my good friend, on the pretenses that we were going to be together forever," said Cole. "But the new year hit in 2017, and stuff hits the fan. Needless to say, I got kicked out. I was renting a room in St. Paul. And I was just at a point where I didn't have the job I had now. I was making good money, but it wasn't enough to hold my own."

Cole's dire straits led him to be referred to the Community Resource and Referral Center (CRRC) in Minneapolis, a veterans affairs department. There, Cole was hooked up with an organization that ultimately turned his life around: Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans, or MACV.

"I talked to (CRRC), and then they hooked me up with MACV," said Cole. "'They'll help you find a job, they'll help you find housing.'"

Cole began attending job club meetings at a community center on Lake Street every Wednesday, where he met MACV employment and reentry program manager Dustin Bystrom.

"He was like my guardian angel," said Cole. "He basically helped me out. He was just like, 'You know, we are here to help you and we're here to serve you the best we can. You helped us, so let us help you.'"

With the help of MACV, Cole found his first solo apartment, and this month, Cole celebrates his one-year anniversary working in sales for Boston Scientific. Much in the spirit of MACV, Cole does what he can to pay it forward to other veterans in a similar situation.

"I joined the (Uptown) VFW a couple of weeks ago," said Cole. "At Boston Scientific, I'm heavily involved in its employee resource group, and also I'm the chapter lead for our LGBT resource group called PRIDE: Promoting Respect, Inclusiveness, Diversity and Equality. So I try to provide the word, spread the word. I'm an advocate for LGBT rights within my company, within my community. I just try to spread the love."

Having emerged from what he described as the lowest point of his life, Cole couldn't sing the praises of MACV any louder.

"Not only did MACV help me find my current job and a place to stay, they also helped me get better self-esteem," said Cole. "It not only provided me a safe space, but they also provided me guidance, and (they told) me everything would be okay. MACV is not only going to help you, but they're also there to bring you out of the slump that you're in."

For more information on MACV and the services they provide, visit www.mac-v.org. ▮

SPC Charles Cole, a beneficiary of the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans program, now works in sales for Boston Scientific. Photo by Chris Tarbox

COMMUNITY | BY CHRIS TARBOX

Celebrating Pride And Bridging Gaps

The upcoming Twin Cities Black Pride Weekend Festival offers everyone a little slice of Pride.

Even though a major of Pride Season festivities occurred during the month of June, that doesn't mean that Pride in the Twin Cities is over. From Aug. 16 to Aug. 18, The Minnesota People of Color Pride Organization, in partnership with Black Table Arts Collaborations, will host the Twin Cities Black Pride Festival, a Pride festival focused on people of color in the local GLBT community.

According to MN POC Pride representative Dennis Anderson, this three-day celebration caters to those who wish to celebrate Pride with less corporate sponsors and more focus on cultural history and engagement.

"I'm on the board of Twin Cities Pride, and I know that each year, we go to Twin Cities Pride and we celebrate, and I think that's great," said Anderson. "But how do we find a specific situation that acknowledges people who don't identify (with Pride) that way? Not everybody wants to come to a corporate Pride."

That's not to say that the Black Pride Festival is wholly separate from the June celebrations; Anderson asserts that the Black Pride festival is more of a complement to them.

"How do you make sure that everyone's voice has been heard?" said Anderson. "We're not trying to be separate, because I want to include Pride because they're a part of us too. I don't think that the Twin Cities Pride in June is a separate thing: we're all invited. I want the same thing to happen here. We want to acknowledge everyone and their culture. How do we figure that out without trying to change the narrative of what Pride is for?"

The celebration begins on Friday, Aug. 16 at Illusion Theater in Minneapolis, where visitors will be welcomed with an educational history of Black Pride, how the movement began, a look at some of the movement's greatest pioneers, and a variety of performances ranging from poetry to dance.

On Saturday, Aug. 17, the Rarig Center at the University of Minnesota will host Black Table Arts' "The Because Black Life Conference", where all day, educational tracks on the black experience in America will be hosted, in addition to offering lunch and dinner to visitors.

Additionally on Aug. 17, MN POC Pride will host a fabulous three-hour Black Pride Party Cruise down the Mississippi River. The cruise, which costs $25 per ticket, will feature musical performances, drinks, and more fun activities.

Image courtesy of the Minnesota People of Color Pride Organization

Finally, the celebration comes to a grand conclusion on Sunday, Aug. 18 in Powderhorn Park, where people of all ages can celebrate Twin Cities Black Pride from 10 a.m. to the late afternoon. Live music, vendors, and various booths will be present at this free festival experience. The goal, says Anderson, is to add to and build upon the Twin Cities Pride experience with different cultural perspectives.

"It's a festival, come and enjoy yourself," said Anderson. "Come and see a different culture, a different idea."

"We want to make sure that people learn why we're doing this," Anderson continued. "We're not trying to be separate or take away from, but add to (Pride season)."

The Twin Cities Black Pride Weekend Festival takes place in Minneapolis Aug. 16-18. For more information, visit www.facebook.com/mnpocpridefestival. ∎

LEATHER LIFE | BY STEVE LENIUS | PHOTOS BY STEVE LENIUS

Beyond the Rainbow - There's A Flag For That

Recently someone asked me for a copy of an article I wrote that was published in 2011 in the *Journal of Bisexuality* (vol. 11, issue 4). In the article I said I believed we were "on the verge of a post-GLBT world, where the terms for which those initials stand will have faded into irrelevance." I continued by writing, "Based on the direction in which I think things are moving, the future will be pangender, pansexual and very open to kink and other forms of alternative sexual expression."

Now, eight years later, it seems to me that we as a community are continuing to move in this direction. And we have made a lot of progress.

Why do I say that? Take a look at all the flags in the Twin Cities Pride parade this year. And look especially at where all those flags were in the parade lineup. At the head of the parade, the first flag was the huge parade-size rainbow flag. This was followed by the bisexual pride flag, the transgender pride flag, and the U.S. Unity flag, which is the Stars and Stripes reimagined to reflect, in the words of unityflag.com, inclusion of "women, people of color, religious minorities, LBGTQ people and Native Americans." The U.S. Unity flag incorporates a slice of the rainbow flag on its left edge.

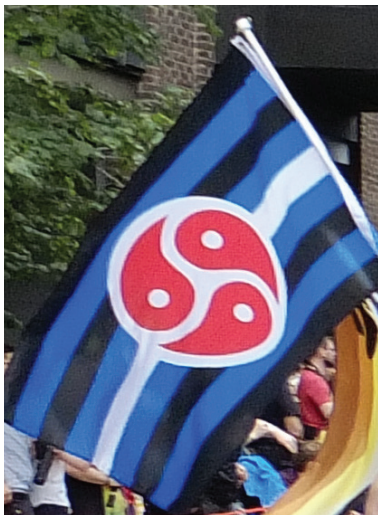
The final giant flag at the start of this year's Twin Cities Pride parade was the huge parade-size leather pride flag, carried by members of the parade's leather contingent. But other members of the leather contingent marched in front of the leather pride flag and carried a collection of other pride flags. Along with smaller versions of the rainbow flag, leather pride flag, bisexual flag, and transgender flag, there were pride flags representing newer gender and sexual orientations: pansexual, genderqueer and non-binary. There also were pride flags for bears, rubber wear enthusiasts, and puppies and handlers, as well as a BDSM rights flag. (If you are not familiar with these flags, see the pictures on this page.)

Seeing all these flags in the parade, the thought occurred to me: Whatever gender you are, whatever your orientation, whatever your interest—well, there's a flag for that.

These newer flags represent continuing efforts to expand freedom and enhance possibilities for everyone—everyone—to be who they are and to live as they choose. Historically, society has tried to tell people who they are (male or female), whom they are supposed to love (someone of the opposite sex), and how they are supposed to love (vanilla sex, preferably missionary position).

If I find that society's expectations don't work for me, I have two ways of looking at the situation:

The first way: I can assume that society's expectations are correct and therefore there is something wrong with me. I then might try to change myself to fit society's expectations. Or I may find that I can't change, which means I live my life in shame and misery, feeling inferior and hating myself for my shortcomings.



BDSM RIghts Flag

Bear Flag

Bisexual Flag

Non-Binary Flag

Genderqueer Flag

The second way: I can assume there is nothing wrong with my desire to live an authentic life in matters of who I am, whom I love, and how I love. I can say that society's expectations are not correct for me—these expectations are outmoded, unrealistic, unfair and limiting. I might then try to change society and its expectations.

Fifty years ago, that's what Stonewall was all about. Today, fifty years later, the process continues. Each of the flags in the parade says that we, as individuals and as a community, have claimed—and are fighting for—freedom concerning who we are, whom we love, and how we love.

It's great to see, and to be among, people who look at things the second way (as described above), and who feel free to be themselves. As I walked the parade route taking pictures of the parade, I saw joy in the faces of the people carrying all these flags. I saw that same joy in the faces of the people watching the parade, and I saw it in the faces of the people in Loring Park at the Pride festival after the parade. It warmed my heart and made my day.

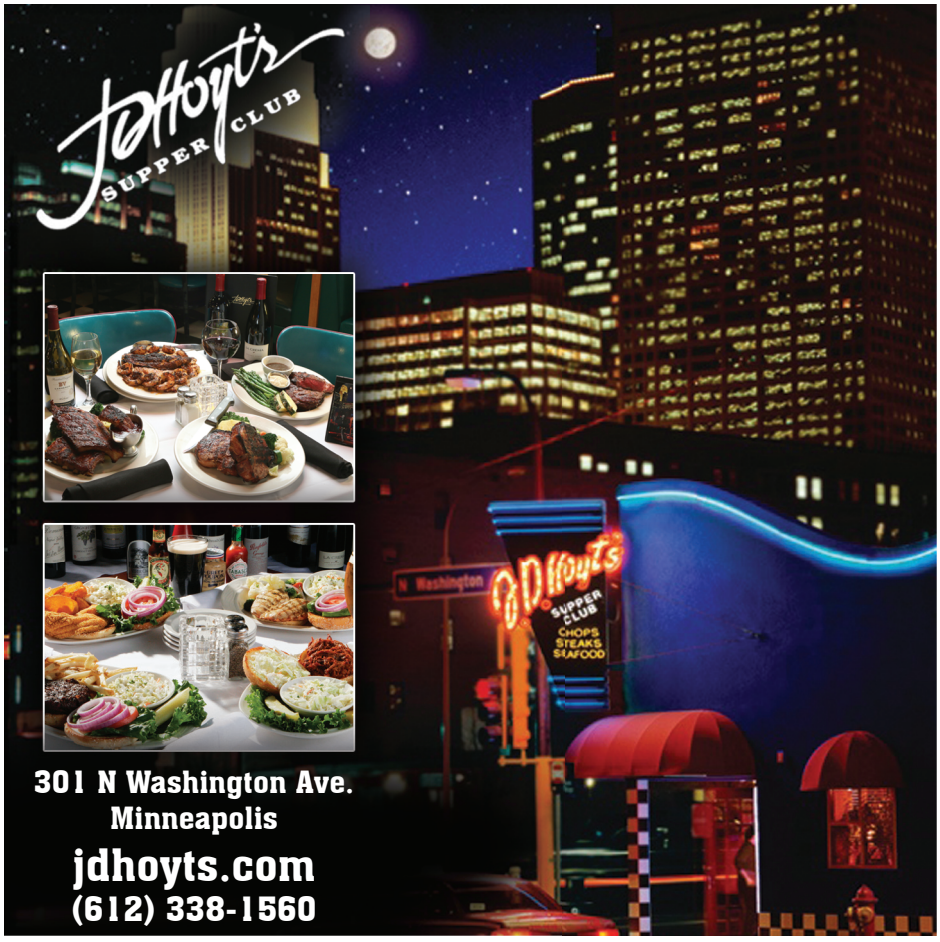
But I know there still are people who look at things the first way (as described above). They suffer in straitjackets of society's making—straitjackets they have adopted as their own. As we continue to claim, and fight for, our own freedom, we are fighting for theirs, too. We must keep being who we are, and being visible, as an example that might let them set themselves free. ∎

Rubber Flag

Pansexual Flag

Transgender Flag

Puppy Flag



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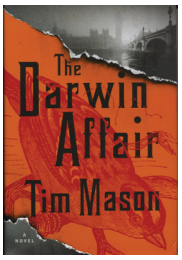


The Darwin Affair

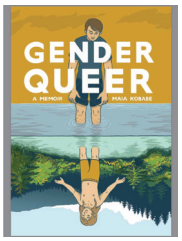
Tim Mason
Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill
$27.95

Who so wants to deny Charles Darwin a knighthood, that an attempted assassination of Queen Victoria's, attacks on Prince Albert, and multiple grisly murders are committed to that end? A cabal of the elite, from the highest ranks of the clergy, educators, and politics. Enter Inspector Charles Field, protagonist and exemplar of Mason's multi-layered Victorian world: this fictional Field is based on the flesh-and-blood Field, aka "Bucket" in Charles Dickens's Bleak House and subject of that author's journalism verité, "On Duty with Inspector Field." Field is one example of the complexity of Mason's skillful plotting, that brings historical figures together with the created, notably "the Chorister," the cabal's man, multi-tasking as kidnapper, dismemberer, Royal stalker and dark engine of Darwin's plot. Upper crust at their beastliest.

Red, White and Royal Blue

Casey McQuiston
St Martin's Griffin
$16.99

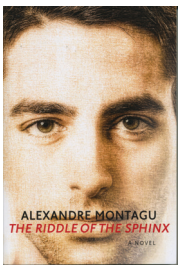
Young love is not always a many-splendored thing. Many snares and pitfalls—pratfalls—lie in wait for the unwary. So it is for Alex Claremont-Diaz who, in addition to his dearth of people skills, his slew-footedness which leads to the destruction of a $75,000 royal wedding cake, is also the son of America's first female president, meaning Alex's every wart, blemish and faux pas is laid bare on every social and un-social media platform on the planet. Worse, despite himself, he has a secret, long-standing crush on England's young, sexy gorgeous Prince Henry. Forced to play nice together after the cake caper, one thing leads to that other thing. Through endless texting, recalcitrant Alex and deeply-closeted Henry explore multiple splendors, climaxing in a sweet finale.



Gender Queer: A Memoir

Maia Kobabe
Lionshead
$17.99

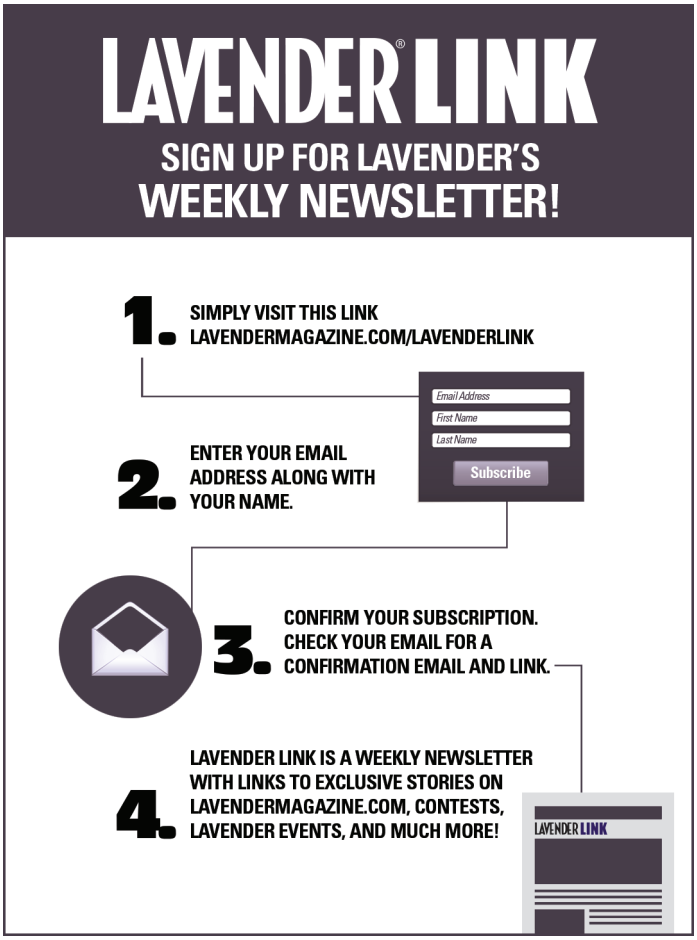
Maia Kobabe has opened up eir life in this graphic memoir, not only for the reader, be they curious or questing, but for the author's self-understanding as well. The book opens in 2014; Kobabe is 24, leaving the family's Northern California home on 120 acres—no electricity, no flush toilets—for San Francisco, and a MFA in comics. Everything overwhelms; teacher directives to write about your "demons" and realizing they're all about gender. Making friends? Dating? Insurmountable obstacles. Kobabe's horror at menstruation, dislike of physical closeness, awkward crushes, self-pleasure, gendered pronouns. Where do I fit? Early journal: "I don't want to be a girl. I don't want to be a boy either. I just want to be myself." An excellent introduction to Kobabe–and yourself?



The Riddle of the Sphinx

Alexander Montague
Persepolis Press
$24.95

You follow a young lad trying to escape revolutionary 1970s Iran, but the boy is gone, you're forced to change horses in midstream, now immersed in a glittering Paris nightlife, then with the protagonist's student life at Princeton and an obsessive, forbidden love. Years older; time and perspective shift again as you find him as a lawyer with a New York practice. Who is the protagonist? What is his real story? The boy who never escaped? The student whose life became unbearable? Facets of a single life, or warnings of the irrevocable outcomes of choices? One lesson to draw might be that the dark workings of our minds, creating obsessions that derail what we believe to be our chosen paths, lie everywhere, at any age. ▮



OUR RIDES | BY RANDY STERN | PHOTOS BY RANDY STERN

2020 Hyundai Palisade Limited AWD

2020 Hyundai Palisade Preview

What do Rainbow Families want in a vehicle?

Space for kids, pets, and everything they'll take on a vacation, for starters. They also want to be comfortable driving a vehicle that is not too big and not too small. And they want to stand out, especially when parking lots are becoming full of the same vehicle in just a few different colors.

The good folks at Hyundai have heard our pleas. And, they delivered in the form of the 2020 Palisade mid-sized, three-row SUV.

Before we talk about the new Palisade, there is some news to parse out. As we know, the number of automotive entities that support us continue to grow. A few years ago, Hyundai Motor America joined in that group with campaigns inside and outside the company to engage with GLBT employees, customers, and stakeholders.

From their corporate GLBT employee resource group to outreach efforts near their Southern California headquarters and beyond, Hyundai has made it clear that they will support our community on equal footing as most of the automotive industry. The result has been the perfect score of 100 points in the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index for both 2018 and 2019.

Hyundai's story goes beyond what transpires at their Fountain Valley, California headquarters. It ultimately comes down to their vehicle lineup—a wide range of vehicles that continues to grow with a small urban SUV coming this fall to a striking new version of Hyundai's mid-sized sedan, the Sonata. The 2020 Palisade represents a new approach to a segment that welcomes families of all kinds with high style, comfort, and drivability.

To find out more about the 2020 Palisade, we went to the suburbs west of Chicago where Hyundai invited us to drive this new SUV out to Starved Rock State Park near Ottawa, Illinois.

Along the way, we had a chance to talk to Derek Joyce, Hyundai Motor America's Senior Manager, Product and Advanced Powertrain PR. We asked him for some insight into the new 2020 Palisade. It all starts with the concept of the vehicle. "We found that in our customer research that they wanted more room and more generous comfort in the rear seats," explained Joyce. There are "seven USBs for children or adults traveling in the second and third rows. A lot of features that really make it comfortable for extended duration, family trips, family adventures and a feeling of spaciousness in the second and third row, which includes not only actual space and really generous area behind the third row for storage, but also the feeling of spaciousness, which is created by a dual-paned sunroof, two separate sunroofs and a very wide glass area in the rear and minimal design tumblehome (the top of the roof coming in on the vehicle)."

The 2020 Palisade comes in three trims: SE, SEL, and Limited. We sampled the latter two on our drive out to our spot along the Illinois River. The SEL offered more than enough amenities, as explained by Joyce, that Rainbow families and other consumers will enjoy. The real showcase of the Palisade is the Limited model, where you have the dual-paned sunroof, a fully digital and customizable 12-1/2-inch instrument binnacle, and a level of luxury befitting of a more premium brand.

There were other differences between our SEL and Limited models that we found. The one thing that drew us to the Limited was the fact that it was quieter than the lower-priced SEL. It was a combination of improved soundproofing materials, along with a higher level of quality throughout the cabin. The SEL offers great value and shares a lot of features, such as second-row power folding seats, and a one-touch second-row slide feature for access to the

third row. While the wide 10.25-inch infotainment screen is available on the SEL, it is standard on the Limited.

As we talked about the second- and third-row seats, Joyce explained further that "whether you have the captain's chair set up or whether you have the three positions set up in the second row, it's going to accommodate that full range of children comfortably. Adults can jump in the back. If you're on a double date, no problem. The adults are going to be comfortable in the second row… There's adjustability of the second-row seat position. You can lengthen out the leg room." The rearmost two rows are where consumers usually make their decision on which mid-sized SUV they will buy or lease.

Powering the 2020 Palisade is a 291-horsepower 3.8-liter V6. It offered great performance on the highway, as well as in the city and out in the countryside. This engine is connected to an 8-speed automatic transmission with a new push-button selector on the console. You can change gears through a pair of paddle shifters on the steering wheel. Both of our testers had the HTRAC all-wheel-drive system and a drive-mode selector that enhances the shifts and drive systems to specific conditions and types of driving. It does have a snow mode that is ready for our winters. With all-wheel-drive, you can get up to 24 MPG on the highway in the Palisade.

But, we can't ignore one fact: The Palisade is an absolute stunner to look at. The front end features a large grille, flanked by turn signals up top, and LED headlamps off to the side. There is a belt line that starts from the lower front-end skin, that is framed by a set of LED running lights and ends up with a chrome strip framing the rear taillight units. The roof is upright with a unique glasshouse profile that offers superb vision all around. This is truly one of the most compelling SUVs ever designed, inside and out.

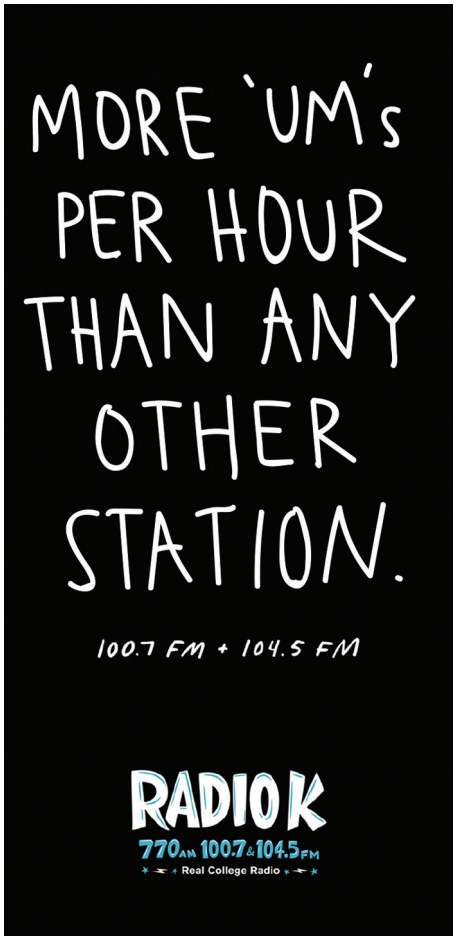
Pricing for the 2020 Palisade starts at $31,550 for the SE model. Our SEL tester came out to around $41,795. Our Limited tester topped out all pricing at $47,495. With some of its competitors creeping up and beyond the $50,000, it is refreshing to see that Hyundai can sell a premium-feeling vehicle for less than that.

The 2020 Palisade should be available at your nearest Hyundai dealer right now.

2020 Hyundai Palisade SEL AWD

As for Hyundai's support of the GLBT community and its employees, Joyce said that Hyundai "definitely reach[es] out strongly to the [GLBT] community. We've had many initiatives in the marketing area as well. In fact, our Vice President had, that's a special focus of a lot of our marketing efforts. So definitely, a priority for Hyundai and something that we definitely make a consistent part of our marketing program."

What we have here is a GLBT-friendly mid-sized three-row SUV with high style, stand-out looks, great space, advanced technology, and wonderful driving manners. In our book, that ticks off all of the boxes. ∎



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ACE OF BABES | BY HOLLY PETERSON

Robin

There is a lot to love (and hate, but I'm staying positive for today) about *Stranger Things* Season 3. There are intelligent, witty, and perseverant female characters. The overabundance of creepy synths and SFX are amazeballs, and that click when all three adventures merge into one storyline toward the end of the series is oh-so-satisfying. But. Perhaps the best thing of all is Maya effin' Hawke, i.e. Robin, i.e. the girl with little geniuses for ears, i.e. our newest queer icon.

Oh yeah, spoiler alert: Robin is gay AF.

Actual spoiler alert: I will not spoil any key plot points, but most of the following is spoiler-adjacent. You've been warned.

For those of you who have not yet finished watching the new season but are continuing to read anyways, Robin is one of the several new Amazing Women™ the Duffer Bros. bequeathed upon us this season. Probably because they're trying to make up for pitting Eleven and Max against each other at the end of last season.

We meet Robin working alongside Steve at Scoops Ahoy, the nautically themed ice cream shop in Hawkins' shiny new Starcourt Mall. Robin quickly becomes an integral character when she singlehandedly translates and decodes the Russian transmission Steve and Dustin were struggling to decipher in the backroom at Scoops Ahoy. It takes her less than a day.

Robin is a stellar character. Not only is her favorite insult "dingus" (mine, too), but she is multilingual, outspoken, silly, genuine, ballsy, and the voice of reason whenever her group panics. And then, as if all that wasn't enough, when Steve confesses his feelings for her, she confesses that she is—wait for it—a lesbian.

(This revelation was tainted slightly by Robin's earlier admission to being obsessed with Steve in high school. She tries to explain that obsession by way of a crush she had on a girl in their class, but it's a weird reversal and bare-minimum sloppy writing.)

Anyhoo, to summarize, Robin is a multilingual, ice cream-slinging lesbian with a penchant for calling people "dingus". She's a goddess.

But wait. There might be more.

But wait. Robin might have one more GLBT+ win for us.

Because Robin, like me, wears a black ring on the middle finger of her right hand.

And Robin and me, we're not alone. Many asexuals (aces, if you prefer cool nicknames) wear a black ring on that particular finger. If aces are still a bit of a mystery for you, the basic rundown is that both asexuals (not into sex) and aromantics (not into romance) group themselves together, but asexuals aren't necessarily aromantic and aromantics aren't necessarily asexual. Like most human characteristics, asexuality exists on a spectrum, so we also include demisexuals among us, who might have active sex lives, but only in the right emotionally intimate situation.

Anyhoo. Rings. In theory, we wear those black rings so we will know who else is an asexual without having to ask. In practice, personally, I just stare quizzically at other's people's rings wondering if they are actually asexual or if they just like black rings and put theirs on that finger without knowing better.

All that to say, Robin is wearing a black ring on a very particular finger and I am staring at it quizzically and wondering if this character is actually asexual or if some costume designer just liked black rings and put Robin's on that finger without knowing any better.

Ace representation is sparse right now. Jughead (of *Riverdale*) was supposed to be ours and they stole him, so we pretty only much have Todd Chavez (of *Bojack Horseman*) right now. I love him, but he's just one cartoon character. We're due another asexual in pop culture and I cannot imagine a better next ace than a super chill, smart lesbian who is played by the daughter of Uma Thurman and Ethan Hawke.

Maybe it's too much to ask what is functionally the 80's (seriously, the "self-aware" misogynistic tone of this season was zero fun) to give us an intersectional character like that, but shoot, we can dream, can't we? My panamorous asexual heart might just explode into a million trillion pieces if *Stranger Things* not only gave us an ace, but also gave our ace a queer romance.

I don't necessarily want a *Stranger Things* Season 4 (still trying to stay positive *so I'm not getting into it*), but according to the rather hungry demogorgon in the end credits, we are getting it. And when it airs, I will watch with bated breath, hoping against hope that there is a second closet out of which Robin will step. ∎

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